Inscriptions

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Inscriptions

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Summary

She may have distracted Jecka tonight but Jecka distracted her, too. Jecka distracted her all the time. When Jecka distracted her, her wrists didn't itch.

They itched now.

Notes

This was not the fic I planned to work on next but the final scene popped into my head and I was like yeah I gotta write this lol it was cathartic honestly. This is much heavier than my other Jeckole fic, please be mindful of the tags!

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

Sometimes Nicole wondered who she'd be if her dad didn't blow his brains out.

She wasn't delusional enough to think she'd be an upstanding citizen or anything. She was already too fucked up by that point—with all the moving and shitty stepdads and watchlist brother and her mom caring more about dick and wine and money than being a mom—but, hey, maybe she could've managed a miracle.

Maybe, with some stability, she could've made some friends until graduation, even if she had to falsify kindness like with the dumb popular girls at her last school. Maybe she wouldn't automatically assume the worst in people, even though she was proven right most of the time. Maybe she would've gained an interest in something, anything, some normal people nonsense like songwriting or drawing or whatever, using that as her outlet instead of drugs. Maybe she could've pretended she had a future and put enough work into her grades to guarantee four years of college. Maybe she wouldn't threaten suicide like it was tattooed to her tongue.

Maybe she wouldn't cut herself.

…

Yeah, right.

She still heard it, occasionally. Every obnoxious firework on the 4th of July, every resounding car alarm as thieves tried and failed to exploit suburban stupidity, each of Mom's slammed doors when she pissed her off with harsh truths; Nicole's ears rung with the echoes of the gunshot.

Not that it scared her, really.

Just reminded her she never escaped that entryway.

She'd blink and transform a predator-infested classroom into a blood-soaked kitchen, the unmistakable stench of thick copper intruding her nose and eyes and ears and throat until the life in her veins begged to be spilled, a crimson puddle becoming a lake. His limp body was like a decrepit prop presented with the theatre club's spotlights, shadows slithering on skin in a mockery of muscle, but if she kept watching maybe that mask of agony would contort into joy. The hole in his skull drained like recklessly toppled paint in everyone's favourite elective, grey matter muddying the windows like macabre stained glass. Eternity in limbo concluded with incarceration by copious chalkboards, inscriptions screeching 'Nicole's fault.'

Of course it was.

Wasn't everything?

How many times was it her fault before it was finally too much for him? Not that she could say exactly what *was* her fault. Christmas visits didn't seem like enough to warrant a smoking barrel, regardless how annoying it must've been spending paychecks on a brat he

saw a few times a year. Being born, maybe? That was definitely the worst thing that ever happened to her, so perhaps it was the worst thing that ever happened to him, too.

Her wrists itched.

How many times did he attempt? With such unrestricted access to freedom she had to wonder how often he flicked off the safety, pressed cold steel to his temple, only for his grip to tremble with lost nerves. It was something other people would applaud, even call brave. How often did hope sprout in his life amidst Nicole's parasitic despair?

Or maybe his decision was simple. Maybe despair festered so deeply it only took one try.

She considered how she'd react if given the chance. If such effortless finality would make her hesitate or if she'd pulled the trigger yesterday. It was, by far, the easiest and most painless way to go, compared to bleeding out or hanging herself or forcing down a Taco Bell's supreme amount of pills. Some dumbasses would argue a large would be enough to see white, but Nicole wasn't a dumbass; the only white down that tunnel was the hospital room where she'd be hooked up to a stomach pump. So fuck that, go big or go home, and aside from adding murder to the mix this was probably the biggest statement she could make. She'd aim for the messiest splatter, branding her room a biohazard, one last 'fuck you' to her mom.

She didn't really care if her mom saw. Actually, scratch that, she did care. She wanted her to see. She wanted her to see her nine months of labour and seventeen years of neglect bloated and rotting and be forced to deal with the consequences. She was a major bitch but not a sociopath like Nicole, so maybe, for once, she'd feel guilty for being such a shitty mom.

Was she a shitty daughter?

That's fine. The bloodline would end with her. It would've regardless—not a hope in hell was she bringing pintsized versions of herself into the world just to get equally fucked up—this way was just faster. She'd be doing the whole world a favour, even if no one was grateful. Not that she'd want anyone to be. She wouldn't have her reputation tarnished by a bunch of virgins who would've raped her corpse shedding crocodile tears and leaving hideous flowers at her grave. If her mom even thought her worthy of the price.

It made sense why 'kill yourself' jokes came as naturally as breathing when she harboured so much fuel to burn. It startled people, shook innocents to their core, especially those who'd never done anything to her but go about their sickeningly happy lives. It was almost adorable in a demented Kidz Bop kinda way how they'd stumble ricocheting the blow; useless when her personal shield made her invulnerable against the same ammo. Nothing could be weaponized against her when the only family member who didn't suck complete ass already killed himself and one day she'd probably kill herself, too.

She wasn't afraid of death. Not when life sucked so bad. A perpetual coma sounded incredible in comparison, honestly; she already wasn't a morning person and spent all the classes she didn't skip sleeping, and even then tiredness coated her bones and drooped her eyes. What she wouldn't give to sleep forever. She'd never have to worry about her school's scum of the earth again. She'd never have to worry about her mom kicking her out if she

failed to graduate. She'd never have to worry about getting left behind, *again*, when she could finally be the one choosing to leave.

Would she see him again if she did? Would he even want to see her again? Would he tell her what was her fault? Would he prefer this version of her to the one who made him kill himself?

Fuck, her wrists were itchy.

But she wasn't in as much of a rush to join him as she sounded, as she'd be missing out on something if she died. And, ironically, only had this something because her dad did. Better late than never with this Christmas gift. It was his best one, after all.

If her dad didn't kill himself, she never would've moved.

"Nicole."

If her dad didn't kill himself, she never would've changed schools.

"Nicole…"

If her dad didn't kill himself, she never would've met—

"*Nicole!*"

She jumped, head snapping to an exasperated Jecka.

An expertly sculpted eyebrow rose, fiery amber eyes scouring her face. "Finally back on this planet, bitch?"

Not quite yet it seemed, heart hammering against her ribs at her expulsion from space. She tried relaxing her breathing as subtly as possible, like whenever she ascended a flight of stairs and had to pretend she wasn't winded when her diet consisted of microwaved meals, stolen fries and drugs. Feeling like a fat kid when she was skinny just wasn't fair, but when was anything?

A few more strained breaths and she recovered enough to remember reality. She grounded herself with every sensation; her bedframe digging into her shoulder blades, laptop warming her thighs, legs slightly elevated to accommodate Jecka's outstretched beneath hers. Jecka was leaning against the wall clad in her nightclothes, lap similarly occupied, MSI humming from her speakers. The sweet scent of their earlier smoke coupled with the gentle lavender of Jecka's perfume permeated the air, Nicole imprisoning the purifying essence in her lungs as long as she could until her stress relinquished with a sigh.

Christ, how mortifying. Normally she only got lost in her head when she was alone. It was too dangerous losing her bearings in public, especially when every man at school was a rapist and every mall cop was a trigger-happy domestic abuser, and she refused to be easy pickings for misogynists and pedophiles. Comparatively, being alone was a blessing and a curse; she wasn't surrounded by virgins desperate to fuck her but her mind was perfectly capable of doing that itself. Exhibitionism was fine, apparently, given the voyeur was Jecka.

Was that good or bad?

She probably shouldn't think about it too much. She'd done enough of that embarrassing shit today.

"You know I'm sober," Nicole grumbled. "Thanks to *you*."

Both of them were, unfortunately, as Jecka insisted they had to be for her to focus. Nicole thought Jecka was joking at first when she called and the words 'sleepover' and 'homework' coexisted in the same sentence. Anyone who believed they could get anything serious done in the presence of their callous best friend was lying to themselves, just like whenever Nicole went to bed assured she'd finish a project in the morning just to sleep through the class anyway. But here Jecka was, equally determined as she was sober, acrylic nails clacking away at her keyboard like a goody two shoes nerd.

Sure, Nicole could've been a bitch and swiped the Xanax she knew lay dormant in Jecka's overnight bag, amongst other covert candy if she was lucky, but then Jecka would've been an even bigger bitch. Jecka would behave the same way she did whenever Jecka tried indulging her nicotine addiction without her, and Nicole did *not* sign up for that insanity tonight.

Jecka waved off Nicole's irritation. "Could've fooled me with how quiet you've been."

Nicole frowned. "You're the one who told me to shut up."

"I told you to shut up because I'm trying to work on my civics paper and you wouldn't stop talking about MySpace hos."

"Cause there's a new one every two seconds." Nicole twirled her laptop so Jecka could see, enough skin on display to be mistaken for RedTube, and to pervs with avalanches of skeet-encrusted socks they were probably interchangeable. "Look at this shit. You think I can just ignore this?"

"I mean, you *could*."

"But how would I show them to you?"

"Bitch, it's fucking MySpace. I already know. Everyone knows."

"Ah, but there's the problem. They *know* but they don't *see*." In case Jecka was blind—she probably was after observing old people articles the past few hours—Nicole swayed her laptop to enrich the onscreen boobs into glorious 3D. "Unlike you, I share dick *and* tit pics."

"Well thank you for your generosity," Jecka scowled, slapping Nicole's laptop shut despite her stream of whiny swears, "but what I really need to see is this paper finished."

Nicole huffed, settling her laptop back in its proper place and revealing her revolutionary finds once more. "Maybe if you listened it already would be."

Jecka glared at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

“It *means* I’ve been trying to help.” She really wasn’t, but she knew how to spin almost anything in her favour. The skills born from lying out of necessity. At least with Jecka everything was harmless, and most importantly fun. “I thought it’d be relevant.”

“Trying to—how are MySpace hos relevant to literally anything?”

“Using social media to promote their business and exercise their freedom of speech in ways hos of previous generations can’t comprehend nor can the government restrict without ruining or banning the whole site, thereby fucking over everyone, including us, who just use it for stalking their exes or some shit.” Nicole emphasized her makeshift intelligence by smacking the mattress with her foot. After a pause, “Ari re-dyed her hair, by the way. Looks just as bad as before.”

Jecka blinked, clearly impressed—or maybe not, pretty features twisting in annoyance. “If you’re so passionate about the transition from brothels to MySpace then you write the fucking paper.”

“Why the fuck would I write a paper for a class I’m not in?”

“You don’t even write them for the classes you *are* in.”

“Exactly. But I can still be a good person and help *you* with my brilliant ideas.”

Jecka clicked her tongue. “More like distracting ideas.”

“I deadass wasn’t talking until you prompted me.”

Jecka shrugged, unbothered, cascades of blonde splashing against the dips of her collarbones like waves wearing down rocks. “Had to make sure you didn’t die with your eyes open.”

The image made her chuckle, along with the sick fact that it was one of the least disturbing things she envisioned today. “Wouldn’t that have been a fun surprise.”

“Your surprises usually are,” Jecka sighed, fluffing up the pillow supporting her back before reclining against the wall again. “Somehow you’re just as loud when you’re quiet. You’re like a dog whistle with nice legs.”

“Congrats on the creative compliment.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Technically you’re here to do your paper… which I still don’t really get.” Nicole slouched further against her bedframe, laziness overpowering the discomfort in her spine. “If you knew I’d distract you why not just do it at your own house?”

Jecka fondly rolled her eyes. “God forbid I actually wanna spend time with you.”

Suddenly Nicole’s stomach was rolling, too. “We spend five days a week together.”

“Time outside of school, asshole. You barely show up anyway.”

“For good reason. Everything about that place sucks.”

Amber eyes peeked up from her laptop. “Even me?”

It should’ve been so easy to clap back with ‘especially you,’ anyone else would’ve also been told to jump off the roof in front of their at risk grandparents, yet the words crumbled to ashes in the back of her throat. She swallowed them down like an oversized pill, mouth dry as she struggled for another response that didn’t induce choking.

“Whatever,” was Nicole’s pathetic mumble, clicking through random slutty pictures in an illusion of productivity—but when was she ever productive about anything unrelated to manipulative sabotage? “Was there a problem?”

Jecka supplied a humourless laugh. “When *isn’t* there a problem?”

“Truth, but I meant with getting my attention. Did you have something to say, or—”

“No, was just checking on you. As I said it looked like you were miles from here.”

“I was in LA.”

“Oh yeah?” Amusement made amber sparkle gold. “Doing what?”

“Anything but this.”

And the amusement vanished as swiftly as LA dreams, accented with the disappointed shake of Jecka’s head. “You’re the biggest complainer I’ve ever met.”

“I prefer innovative.” Nicole smirked even as Jecka resumed typing, pretending to ignore her. Jecka should’ve known what she was in for when reminding Nicole she was still alive and now she had to deal with the consequences. “There’s room for improvement in everything. I’m just not afraid to vocalize it.”

“Not afraid to vocalize your feelings, either?”

Her smirk yanked down like a trapdoor, lost in the abrupt descent. Jecka didn’t look at her when she spoke and this detachment only extended the fall, like Nicole’s landing could’ve been softened by pools of liquid gold but instead she drowned in a bottomless pit of darkness while her heart stuttered at the top for easy viewing, and of course that’s when Jecka decided to look.

Nicole knew it was too late but drilled her chipped claws into jagged stone and climbed anyway, desperate to confine her troublesome source of humanity from the one person who recognized it beyond the impassible, dysfunctional layers, and what first emerged from the abyss was her voice. “I don’t have any of those.”

A little cracked, but whatever.

“Okay, theatre kid,” Jecka scoffed, like she hadn’t just emotionally Sparta kicked Nicole into oblivion. “Wanna try that again?”

“I’m fine,” she stressed, as pathetic and unconvincing as before. “Hurry up and finish that shit.” She nudged the back of Jecka’s laptop with her knee, maybe too roughly given Jecka’s low *tsk* and rush to stabilize it. “The sooner you’re done the sooner we can pop everything in our pockets.”

“What pockets?” Jecka questioned with a growing smile, apparently humouring her. For all Nicole complained about, she wouldn’t complain about small miracles. “We’re in our pyjamas.”

“I should kick you out right now.”

“You won’t, though.”

Damn, confidence. Annoying that she was right.

“No, I won’t. Rather kill myself than walk that far.”

“It’s a wonder how you pass gym.”

“By being skinny and underage.”

“Sad but true.”

“Who knew pedophilia would have an upside?”

“Please shut up again.”

Nicole snickered—it was always entertaining riling Jecka up—though despite her lighthearted tone she seemed as serious as every tryhard who based their entire personality on getting into college, but since Jecka also happened to be cool Nicole reluctantly obeyed her demand, focusing once more on the abundance of MySpace hos at her disposal.

Or, she tried.

It was one thing to focus on prosti-titties when she wanted to, another when she had to. Not that she *actually* had to as if held hostage by some MySpace trafficker or something, the very idea dumb enough to produce fantasies about chucking her laptop out the window. Normally there were a fuckton of other conspicuous websites she’d peruse to cure her boredom or fend off intrusive thoughts but currently all her fallbacks sounded as appealing as Jeffery’s nasally cartoon-ass voice. Nothing sounded adequate for tonight’s turmoil. With boneless indecision she remained fused to her bed like a coma patient, soundless and awaiting chatter, sleep or death. Whichever came first.

The silence was stifling, air bubbles of noise building and bursting with quiet MSI, speedy typing, shuffling fabric, and the occasional pre-wreck vehicle pretending these suburban streets were highways; all incomparable to the soothing melody of Jecka’s voice.

Like some fairytale childhood music box, she didn’t realize she’d miss the nostalgic tune until she needed it as badly as alcoholics needed alcohol to remember how to beat their kids like their parents instructed. Jecka usually talked a lot when they were together; sometimes

funny gossip like how the pregnant girl in her class might be having twins, or the blandest shit Nicole wouldn't even humour like an unwanted recap of last week's Smallville episode. It didn't really matter so long as Jecka was talking. Her inflections were easy on the ears yet sharp enough to secure Nicole in the present, tiny daggers tearing away the traitorous thoughts tugging Nicole to the past.

She may have distracted Jecka tonight but Jecka distracted her, too. Jecka distracted her all the time. When Jecka distracted her, her wrists didn't itch.

They itched now.

Filled with a dull sense of purpose she scanned her bare arms. Remnants of previous wars crosshatched along her prominent veins, pale skin darkened with hazy battles, none particularly memorable but the addicting numbness was. The latest lines weren't raised anymore, blended with the old, flesh primed for a fresh set.

It'd been a long time since she last cut. Probably the longest since she started. It wasn't hard to guess why. What else could restrain her but—

She jolted when fingers grazed her knee.

Her gaze flicked to the source, one of Jecka's hands resting at her keyboard and the other by Nicole's leg, fingers drumming in deep thought. Every once in a while Jecka ceased her gentle ministrations to hastily type her Jimmy Neutron level brain blast before returning her hand to its previous position, absentmindedly rubbing and stroking and playing with Nicole's pyjama pants. So casually, too, every swivel of her wrist and brush of fingertips bordering on natural, like she gave this type of affection all the time.

And it was only when she did that Nicole remembered, yeah, she *did*.

Since their dynamic pretty much stayed the same—especially at school because fuck how many unsolicited threesome invitations that would lure—Nicole often forgot they started dating last month. Only difference now was Jecka would tease her with petnames that made them both want to hurl. Jecka would subtly hold her hand under the cafeteria tables. Jecka would tug her into bathroom stalls for a sloppy makeout sesh. Jecka would caramelize smoke in her lungs and exhale molten sweetness into Nicole's open mouth. During sleepovers when Jecka wasn't being a nerd she'd spend the night painting Nicole's neck with lipgloss and bruises and the morning nuzzling into her masterpiece.

Thank god Nicole was skilled with makeup.

Jecka was too, probably even more than her, but she didn't have to cover hickeys as often since Nicole never initiated anything. Maybe that's why they hadn't fucked yet, despite Jecka's insatiable libido. Maybe Jecka was waiting for her—considerate in a way so distinctively Jecka that set her leagues apart from any 'nice guy' assuring the same but ready to dip the moment he scored—but if that's the case she'd be waiting a long time. Not that Jecka wasn't fuckable, she was 100% the most fuckable bitch Nicole had ever seen, but because if Jecka gave as amazing head as she promised and Nicole *still* wanted to kill herself she had no idea how she'd face her again.

She'd never admit it out loud. Doing so would be the same as admitting Jecka actually meant something to her. Meant more than anyone. More than she thought anyone could. How Jecka should mean enough for Nicole to be normal. To be happy. Because when they first started dating, when Jecka kissed her in her car after driving her home from Red Lobster and she tasted of shared cheesy biscuits and nicotine and everything felt good and right for once, she genuinely thought this would replace her razorblade.

But life was too cruel to cut any slack, especially for her.

There was always some monstrosity around the corner waiting to jump, and even with her guard up she couldn't control how often pedophiles flirted with her, how often her mom yelled at her, how often she warped back to that entryway. What she *could* control was how she dealt with these overwhelming feelings in a world that didn't care how teenagers felt, and her primary fix hadn't failed her yet. It didn't require permission, didn't require a signature, didn't require anything that put her at another's mercy.

The time, tool, location, size, pain—everything was her choice.

Not that it always felt like it.

It usually had nothing to do with wanting to die. Just about feeling something on her own terms. Being so emotionally stunted meant physical pain was her most accessible option, and unlike Karen's corrosive purging cutting was by far the hottest and most cathartic form of self-harm. The chill of cold steel, the adrenaline of the slice, the beauty of beading blood, the burning aftermath of inflamed skin, the sting of cleansing water, the familiarity of the ritual; the rush blurred everything else until she was calm enough to endure whatever life threw at her next.

But the relief was temporary, like every good thing. Like Jecka would be if she kept this up. And she hated how that wasn't enough to make her stop imagining doing it in front of her, for the morbid desire electrifying her nerves to at least fuck off until Jecka went home tomorrow. How many stages of pathetically deranged did someone need to be to knowingly cut for an audience, especially their best—girlfriend? She should just become a MySpace ho at that point; if she couldn't best the addiction may as well let sick freaks send her fat checks. The relief wouldn't feel as temporary, then.

Ari and Emily were in a similar boat, weren't they? And that was just out of the people she knew. She wouldn't be surprised if over half the school had issues hidden under their clothes, or even worn proudly in the open like gold medals for the poor mental health Olympics. Ari's were only on her thighs so her parents wouldn't see; Nicole's mom didn't even bat an eye anymore. Emily's enveloped her body like a blanket of shoddily sewn seams, a level of hardcore frankly beyond Nicole's range. Despite the difference in determination, both were hot for it. She knew it was fucked up to think that. She also knew it was fucked up to feel hot for doing it, too.

Jecka made her feel hot for other reasons.

She shouldn't need this anymore.

Although, if she found the courage to cut deep enough… could she see him again? Even if he didn't want to see her, that was fine. There were other benefits. She'd be free of her mom, her brother, her school, all this bullshit that broke her long before she knew she was broken. She'd be free of herself.

Jecka would be free of her.

Her wrists were itchy.

They were so itchy.

"Nicole?"

Jecka's voice was achingly soft, a ghost of a whisper, yet commanded greater attention than her prior shout. It cruised through Nicole's ears and nestled like a fuzzy blanket over her brain, replaying over and over until the softness grew spikes. The shoddy needle scraped the record until nothing dwelled but sizzling white noise and the wistful reminder of how earnestly her name could be spoken.

How it became incomprehensible when spoken like that.

Nicole debated ignoring her, ignoring the foreign language like she always did when Jecka tried seducing her in splintered French, even if it only bought a few seconds. She probably could've gotten away with it, too. Maybe a few seconds was all it would've taken for Jecka to speak her name the usual way. The way she knew how to respond to. How could she respond to what she couldn't understand?

She was afraid of the awaiting concern; gold-plated artificiality from other cheap whores, but Jecka's gold was the richest purity. And that was worse. She was afraid the second she looked up Jecka would know everything. Her feelings, her lack of feelings, her month-long itch congealing at the worst possible moment.

She didn't want Jecka to see this. She didn't want Jecka to see she was fucked up in ways she couldn't make funny. She didn't want Jecka to see how much of a piece of shit she really was.

But Jecka already saw, didn't she?

Sure enough, when Nicole finally gained the willpower to meet Jecka's eyes she flinched with everything but surprise, Jecka's pinched brow and inspective gaze and the lack of casual drumming at Nicole's leg all pointing to obvious perception. As expected, Jecka knew. She knew exactly where Nicole had been this whole time. She knew exactly what Nicole wanted right now. She knew Nicole wasn't okay.

Nicole bypassed the 'not okay' status the day of that gunshot. And every day since, especially after Jecka asked her out, Nicole felt wrong. She shouldn't fucking feel like this, not when the most beautiful person she knew was in her bed and staring at her like she'd offer dual world domination if she could. But Nicole still felt it, something vile slithering

under her skin and within the cavity of her tightening chest. If not for the painful slams against her ribs she'd think nothing was in there.

Jecka deserved better. She deserved someone hot and rich and alive past thirty. She deserved someone who didn't complain when she wanted to spend time together, even if that time was spent working on stupid school shit. She deserved someone who pulled *her* into bathroom stalls sometimes. She deserved someone who didn't have a patronizing mom, a pedophile brother, and a dad who killed himself.

She deserved someone who didn't still want to cut.

As if sensing Nicole's self-depreciation—she wouldn't be shocked if Jecka was telepathic, honestly—Jecka shut her laptop followed by Nicole's, carefully placing them further down the bed. Jecka crawled to Nicole's side, practically in her lap, stabilizing herself with one idle hand on Nicole's shoulder while the other sparked a leisure trail along her collar, up her neck, across her cheekbones and back down again. Her skin tingled with each touch, fingers twitching at how simple Jecka made it look, how good she made it feel, and even then Nicole couldn't reciprocate. All she did was take and take and take like an emotionally constipated leech.

She was pathetic.

"Do you remember what we talked about?" Jecka asked. It wasn't accusatory, it wasn't condescending, it was attentive, so maybe Nicole's feverish wave of defensiveness and shame further proved she should've been aborted. Of course she fucking remembered what they talked about. How could she forget Jecka asking her to tell her whenever she felt like cutting? How could she forget how Jecka looked at her, how she made her promise, how upset Jecka got when Nicole initially played the whole thing off like it wasn't a big deal—cause it didn't feel like a big deal. It shouldn't have been. Shouldn't still be.

Not that Jecka found it bad, not that she found it disgusting, not that Jecka found *her* bad or disgusting, she just wanted to know. She wanted to help. She wanted to be a good friend and an even better girlfriend.

Nicole wasn't either of those.

"Don't fucking baby me," Nicole snapped, much harsher than intended, venom spraying from her tongue like an unconscious attempt to scare Jecka away. She didn't mean it. Not really. But all she seemed able to say to Jecka were things she didn't mean.

Jecka, patience of a saint—no other way to survive her company this long—appeared unperturbed by her outburst. "Do you remember?" she repeated, just as calmly.

Nicole's anger depleted in a rough swallow of cotton. "Yeah."

Jecka wasn't fazed. "And?"

She took a deep, shaky breath. "I want to."

“How badly?”

Nicole flexed her hands, recollecting the feeling of control, the addictive sting and mesmerizing rivulets of blood, easily envisioning red splatters staining her bedsheets. “If you weren’t here I already would’ve.”

Her admission hung heavy like smog and Nicole didn’t breathe, letting this pollution seep into her pores and contaminate whatever remained. God, she was fucking rotten, wasn’t she? And not in the amusing way proclaimed by her victims; in the way that would ruin Jecka’s life. She’d infect her, poison her, and once upon a time she might’ve even found that outcome rewarding but that was before Jecka became the only person in the world who made life tolerable. The only person she could laugh with, talk shit with, get high with, actually feel like she might have a future with.

Why the fuck would Jecka want a future with her?

The rhythm of Jecka’s strokes ended by cupping Nicole’s cheek, tilting her face towards hers. Thick eyelashes fluttered low and then Jecka was slowly inching closer, giving Nicole ample opportunity to push away if she didn’t want her. But it was embarrassing how much she wanted her, so when Jecka’s glossy lips formed a soft seal on hers Nicole kissed back with the faintest of movements, treasuring her warmth and hint of raspberry. Even at her frailest, flippest, foulest, even when she felt she didn’t deserve them to begin with, Nicole would never let Jecka’s kisses go unreturned.

How scary to know she could still sink lower.

“See?” Jecka smiled brightly when she pulled back, Nicole’s personal midnight sun, tenderly brushing loose hair behind Nicole’s ear. “Isn’t it great I came here to do my paper?”

Nicole couldn’t stand that look in her eyes, couldn’t stand how gently she treated her, couldn’t stand how much of Jecka’s feelings were wasted on her. Nicole sighed and turned away, shoulders drooping, energy sapped. “You should go.”

Again, another thing she didn’t mean. Or maybe she did. It would be better for Jecka if she did.

“Too bad, bitch,” Jecka said with a wink, popping that suggestion like a balloon. “I’ve got a better idea.”

Jecka abandoned Nicole on the bed with a flood of empty space and cool air—not that Nicole immediately missed her body heat like some clingy virgin or anything—and knelt by her overnight bag, shuffling through whatever assortment of shit she believed necessary for one night away from home. She’d absolutely be the type to overfill her suitcase on a trip, wouldn’t she? Maybe the constant relocating had one benefit in how it taught Nicole to pack light, because who knew when she’d be on the move again like some runaway.

It would be so easy to run away.

“The hell are you looking for?” Nicole asked.

“Bath bomb,” Jecka said, releasing a cry of success and unveiling a tiny box.

Nicole raised an unimpressed brow. “You just… brought that here?”

“Judgement, much? I deserve to pamper myself as much as the next bitch.” Jecka peered over her shoulder with a soft, knowing smile. “But warm water relaxes you, right?”

Nicole’s breath caught in her throat. She’d only mentioned that in passing once, long before they got together, how on a particularly suicidal evening with blood streaming down her wrists it was the lull of a steaming bath that made her decide nah, fuck it, not today, and discard her razor on the counter. She nearly forgot about it with how readily nights like that were overwritten, but of course Jecka remembered. If she remembered pointless details about the whores she’d known since third grade, why wouldn’t she remember Nicole’s pointless details, too?

Maybe because they weren’t pointless to Jecka.

Another point scribbled onto the endless list of reasons Jecka was nothing like her. Well, she was in some ways, many of which were probably why they instantly clicked. They both knew the combo of drugs, internet and free shit was the most reliable source of fun in a world progressively making everything less fun and more expensive. They both knew how to fling cunning insults at each other and every loser who was born to be bullied. They both knew every guy at their school deserved to be eradicated and weren’t shy to remind them every chance they got. They both knew how to get anything they wanted from anyone defenseless against being stepped on like a welcome mat, sometimes even sharing the spoils when the accomplishment was significantly sweet.

But Nicole only committed details to memory when they were blackmail material. Any display of empathy was her being a manipulative bitch, and if people kept falling for it why would she stop? It felt beyond her control honestly, a switch in her personality long since rusted, only wiggling for fingers adorned with acrylics.

Jecka, on the other hand, was only a manipulative bitch half the time—and not nearly as convincing. She gave in too early, fumbled the specifics, accidentally revealed her schemes so often it tended to fuck Nicole over, too. She’d try to swoop in and save her, obviously, what kind of evil lesbian partner would she be otherwise, but sometimes Jecka’s spiteful missteps were beyond saving. Sometimes Jecka just wasn’t qualified for the morally questionable lines Nicole already crossed.

Because Jecka cared. About herself, about other people, about Nicole.

And unlike Nicole, Jecka wasn’t afraid to show how much.

Jecka’s soft smile lingered as she stood and clasped Nicole’s hand. “C’mon.”

She led her towards the bathroom with unhurried steps, nothing forceful in her grip or the reassuring strokes of her thumb, rather a life preserver preventing exhaustion from treading water. Nicole could yank away whenever she wanted. If she thought the sensation of cutting was superior to Jecka’s support, she was free to drown. The frigid depths called to her, still,

anchors chained around her ankles, even with Jecka's hand warm in hers. She hated herself for it. How Jecka was trying, she was always trying, and Nicole never tried at all.

She didn't know how to try. She didn't know how to care for herself and didn't know how to care for Jecka, either.

Would she ever?

Would she be around long enough to learn?

After reaching the bathroom Jecka perched upon the side of the porcelain tub, posing like the sleepwear variant of a Greek statue. She twisted the valve and water gushed forth, occasionally gauging the temperature by dipping her hand. Nicole existed in two conjoined entryways and waited, letting Jecka work in silence until the tub was full. Not only because she had no idea what to say but because there was something mystifying about Jecka in her nurturing element, this transient, crystalline window convincing Nicole she was dating a goddess instead of a girl.

"I love this one," Jecka mused like the last few emotional minutes never happened, ripping both Nicole from her humiliating thoughts and the chalky bath bomb from its packaging and plopping it in the water. "It's the marshmallow that really sells it."

The brisk fizzing drew Nicole closer, watching the water become pink and frothy like spiked pink lemonade. Tasty. She wouldn't say no if one was offered but tonight was apparently destined to reek of grapefruit, shadowed with a hint of—

"You mean vanilla?"

"I *mean* marshmallow," Jecka scoffed, flapping the empty box like a piece of sheet metal. "Says so on the package."

"So vanilla."

"Whatever, bitch." Jecka's lips curled in a playful smile. "Let me be pretentious in peace."

Marshmallow. Yeah, okay. Who made this, the same genius who made a campfire scented candle? What was the *point*?

It made Jecka happy. That was the point.

"God, this smells so fucking good," Jecka practically moaned when the bath bomb finished dissolving, the aroma clinging to the air both strong and gentle like the siren's song of freshly baked cake when she was anywhere but the kitchen. Jecka hopped to her feet, shimmying around Nicole to the door. "You better enjoy it for me, okay?"

Jecka turned away, hand on the handle, and, for some reason, Nicole never considered the possibility of Jecka leaving. This entire time she kinda just pictured them hanging out in the bathroom, enjoying this *marshmallow* scent and each other regardless if Nicole got in the bath or not. When Jecka was around she was distracted. When Jecka was around her thoughts were muted. When Jecka was around she had a reason to fight the urge.

If Jecka wasn't around—

Her hand shot out, clutching Jecka's shirt.

"Stay."

It wasn't a voice she recognized—like hearing yourself on video for the first time and realizing everyone heard you differently—and neither did Jecka, given her wide eyes and slack jaw. Nicole's stomach sunk, feeling small under such unbridled scrutiny from the only person in the world who didn't suck, the only person who saw past her surface, when there was suddenly a giant, oozing crack in her shell. Each golden flicker peeled her further apart until she was a stranger to herself.

Jecka never said anything and never looked away, the click of the lock jumpstarting Nicole's heart, and it was only then she registered the depths of her request. What Jecka staying would entail. This wouldn't be like the strategic, hasty changing in the locker room to avoid their gym teacher's spy cameras and the gym teacher himself. This wouldn't be like when they lounged by the pool at Kelly's disastrous parties or slept together in their underwear. This wouldn't be something Nicole could conveniently forget.

Jecka wouldn't let her forget, would she?

And maybe, just this once, Nicole didn't want to.

Akin to how she didn't want to forget the hypnotic image of Jecka putting her hair up. That style *was* Jecka, just like Nicole was her ponytail. It was familiar, easy, the most flattering method. She'd look homeless if she kept it down all the time and like she was trying too hard if she attempted anything else. But Jecka would look good regardless, even during the process. There was a certain elegance in how it took more than one try to gather her lion's mane into a messy bun, some rebellious wavy strands framing her face, her jaw and neck sharpened without the blunting blonde backdrop. She looked so different yet exactly the same, some sort of magic trick that was technically mediocre and shouldn't be surprising but all of Jecka's performances this month were surprising.

And the surprises weren't over, apparently, Nicole's heart soaring alongside Jecka's shirt.

She faintly heard the *fwump* as it landed in the realm of who the fuck cared but her attention was glued to the generous amount of tan skin on display. On display just for *her*—her mouth mimicked a desert and annoying ass butterflies began devouring the oasis in her gut—because she asked her to stay. Because this was what staying meant. Just as quickly there was more, movements swift and unwavering as Jecka let her pyjama pants and underwear fall to the floor, kicking them like trash into the same realm.

Nicole knew she was sober, it was an unfortunate fact she would've continued complaining about had her night not taken a tumultuous turn, but suddenly felt like she'd popped enough pills to drop an elephant and then proceeded to raid her mom's wine stash. Shaky knees made standing upright a struggle, and being unprepared for the VIP pass to so much *Jecka* meant her gaze couldn't settle on one place, darting up and down and lingering and feeling like a

creep for lingering then repeating the inevitable cycle until she was dizzy. Complete opposite of sober behaviour, yet she was powerless against such intoxication.

She wasn't dumb, though. She knew Jecka was hot. She wouldn't be dating her if she didn't think she was hot. But 'hot' was often diluted by the abundance of people who used it to tell so little. It was a placeholder heedlessly thrown by douchebags who've never touched boobs and hopefully never would. It couldn't possibly encapsulate Jecka's every curve, every dip, every perfection and imperfection, her sureness of her body and herself. How every inch of Jecka's skin was smooth, unmarred, unlike everyone she knew. Unlike herself. Maybe 'hot' was enough for those who didn't know Jecka, for those who didn't deserve to, but it wasn't enough for what she was in this moment. What she was for Nicole.

Jecka was *stunning*.

When Jecka stepped closer Nicole imagined this was what cornered animals felt like, the mere snap of a twig determining fight or flight yet her mutinous body chose freeze, holding her breath as Jecka lifted her hand. A finger pressed under Nicole's chin with just enough pressure to close her mouth—and it was only then she realized she'd spent the last few minutes catching flies like some fucking virgin. Heat flooded her cheeks, burning even hotter at the fleeting amusement sparkling in Jecka's eyes. It was *not* fair that she was the one embarrassed right now. Jecka had her full tits out and she didn't look embarrassed at all. God, fuck her. She may be stunning but she was still a bitch. A stunning bitch.

Different, yet exactly the same.

Nicole shivered when the finger idling at her chin trailed down her neck to toy with the straps of her tank top, curling underneath before flattening the fabric again. Jecka's other hand joined this curious exploration, running down her sides and pinching the hem of her shirt, silently requesting permission. As if suffering a near ninety degree drop on a roller-coaster Nicole's stomach rolled and her heartbeat skyrocketed and she wanted to claw free of this fragile flesh prison. It was stupid how shy she felt. It was stupid that for even a second she wished to disappear into the walls and then into traffic, like she'd look more appealing smeared across asphalt. It was stupid because she knew she was hot. She *knew* it. Fucking everyone wanted to bang her, and she really did mean everyone.

Everyone excluding Jecka right now.

Nicole was, unfortunately, intimately familiar with the slimy looks people wore when undressing her with their eyes. It twisted their whole expression into something wretched; what always lurked behind cheap masks shattered by a mere bra strap in math class. No amount of telling them to kill themselves or threats to get them fired would make them stop, as was the life of a teenage girl—or any age of girl, really. No one who found her attractive seemed capable of looking at her with anything other than flagrant lust.

But Jecka's eyes brimmed with something else, something Nicole understood in theory but not in practice, and very much did *not* understand how anyone could feel it for her.

She also didn't understand why she lifted her arms like some obedient puppet, or why her frustrating butterflies worsened at Jecka's relieved smile. She held her breath as Jecka

stripped her, clothes gradually replaced by cool air, and not once did the gleam in Jecka's eyes change. Even when they swept across Nicole's body, across places she'd never seen before, she still looked at her like she was a person, her girlfriend, the exact same Nicole—even if a bit different.

Jecka cupped her face, thumbs stroking her cheeks and gaze drawn to her lips, and Nicole was prepared for the imminent kiss. She *wasn't* prepared for the skin-on-skin contact of their bodies flush together, her abrupt gasp mingling with Jecka's during the brief separation of their lips before Jecka dove back in, tongue eternally soft and spirited against hers. Nicole struggled concentrating on anything more than staying alive when Jecka's spellbinding hands summoned goosebumps down her body, glided along her swells of her hips, dizzy when one rested at the small of her back like it belonged there.

Nicole's fingers twitched violently at her sides, nails indenting her palms. Other than responding to Jecka's kiss and leaning into her hold she was frozen, like some curse rendered her immobile. But it had nothing to do with curses or misplaced blame or the lack of stimulants in her system and everything to do with her complete incapability. Of being a girlfriend. Of being worth a damn. Of everything. She couldn't touch Jecka, wouldn't. She'd taint her, make her ugly somehow. It shouldn't be possible but if any fuckup could achieve it, it was her.

Thankfully—God, how fucked was it she considered it that way—she never got the chance, even though she wasn't thankful Jecka pulled away. But she didn't go far, panting slightly against Nicole's lips with beautifully rosy cheeks and a pleased smile, a sight that clamped Nicole's ribs around her heart. Jecka leaned in again to press a lingering kiss to her forehead, that patch of skin unobstructed by Nicole's bangs always her primary target. It was never a matter of *if* she'll kiss it, but *when*. Just like Nicole didn't *hope* for it, she *expected* it.

Did Jecka still have hope? Did she ever?

Whether she did or not evidently wasn't Jecka's priority, rather sitting in the tub with a content hum, scooting back and letting her arm dangle over the side. Foam hugged her form and murky pink waters complemented her skin tone as much as her commonly coloured clothes. She took a showy inhale of grapefruit and marshmallow and sighed, clearly happy to indulge in her delicacy—and, judging by the look she tossed Nicole, even happier to indulge in it with her. Jecka spread her legs in invitation, knees poking above the water like sandy islands, waving Nicole over to claim her spot.

Nicole's gaze flicked between Jecka's easygoing expression, extended hand, and the expanse between her legs, and even now that her obstacle was occupied and she could make a beeline for the door if she so chose—why the fuck would she choose that? Why be somewhere Jecka wasn't when she could be with her *and* immersed in warmth? This was supposed to be her bath, anyway.

Plus she already felt exposed enough to Jecka—with her irritating insight and intellect and perseverance. No matter how much Nicole tried, no matter how much she pushed her away and kept to herself and treated her opposite of how she should be treated, hiding anything from Jecka was useless. Standing around naked would just make it worse—even if Jecka and her not-so-subtle wandering eyes didn't agree.

So Nicole hurried in, plopping in the vacant space with an undignified splash, back to Jecka's warm front, and when Jecka's arms wrapped around her middle to pull her closer she pretended not to notice anything squishing against her spine. Instead she focused on any and every other part of Jecka, starting with the gentle brush of her thumbs along her sides. The embrace of her thighs as Jecka pressed their legs together. The weight of her head as Jecka rested her chin on Nicole's shoulder, occasionally peppering kisses along the stretch of skin approaching the nape of her neck. Nicole awaited the teeth and suction that usually followed but none came, merely the continuation of comforting kisses. Once confident this was truly all this bath was going to be she finally let herself relax as much as she could while naked with her naked girlfriend, slumping in Jecka's incessant security.

She briefly forgot about hating herself and that's how she knew the warm water was helping, enhanced further by Jecka's presence and body heat and even the aroma of her dumb little bath bomb that would undoubtedly stain her bathtub. She peered down at the offensively pink water, how it mutated the tips of her hair into oil spills. Using a finger she lazily swirled the frothiness in front of her, transfixed by her makeshift whirlpool, by how effortlessly she formed something so destructive. If she swirled faster maybe it would become dense enough to conceal the horrors that lay below.

But she knew she lacked such energy, she never had energy for anything, and as the whirlpool faded her arms became clearer. Not fully, though, the shimmering of the water alongside the shade veiling the details of past scars. Not that she needed a magnifying glass to pinpoint the expired crust of each marking or the feeling they gave her. The feeling she craved, even now. Even in warm water. Even in Jecka's arms.

God, she was so…

She was so fucking pathetic.

She had to stop thinking that way if only because Jecka always sensed it, and this time such perception formed in how Jecka reached under Nicole's arms and slowly lifted them just beyond the surface, old scars now fully visible to them both. Nicole bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to almost make a new one, fighting the urge to rip from Jecka's grasp and submerge them again, ashamed in ways she never experienced before Jecka. Instead she stayed very still, even when Jecka let go, even when Jecka's hot breath washed over her ear, eyes drilling holes in the sheen on her skin normally only present after cleaning her wounds, not before infliction.

Jecka trailed the pads of her fingers around her scars at first, deliberately avoiding contact, giving Nicole the chance to pull away like she always did, but Jecka was magnetic, enchanting, and whether drunk or sober or just plain entranced Nicole wasn't going anywhere. Then Jecka traced each one from start to finish, regardless of length and regardless of depth, as if reading and memorizing every event in Nicole's life, whether cloaked or downplayed, that made her reach for her blade. Not rushing, not judging, but taking her time to understand. Maybe taking the time to comprehend how much empty space remained. How it probably wouldn't be so empty if she wasn't around.

Nicole wouldn't say it. Just like she wouldn't say a lot of things Jecka already knew.

Fingers became nails, the sluggish, gentle scratches bordering on ticklish, the tease before the pain. The stencil before the tattoo. The test to determine which angle would look the most aesthetically pleasing—or would make wimps lose their willpower. Just like before Jecka mapped out each one, never digging any rougher.

Until she did.

The strangled whimper that erupted from Nicole's throat was another reason to kill herself, but even if she did the delicious *scrape* of acrylic would bring her back to life. Her muscles tensed, hands balling into fists as she fixated on Jecka's nails dancing across her wrists, able to draw blood like any other tool but purposely light enough not to pierce, a doting imitation to satisfy her urge so she didn't have to. Even when Nicole was panting she didn't stop, not until fresh marks camouflaged the stale, lost and insignificant beneath Jecka's inscriptions.

The old ones made her feel something, true. Sometimes they numbed all feelings. Sometimes they merely passed the time. She gobbled down anything and everything they provided, too gluttonous to savour the high and too greedy to stop. She kept chasing the cut that would make her feel more, feel less, feel nothing at all.

Nothing ever made her feel like this.

She savoured it this time, the tender burn skipping across her arms like she'd been scrubbed raw, invisible poison from her shrouded scars seeping through the raised, inflamed lines that would vanish in less than an hour. Knowing the memory would last longer was her fundamental ointment, but the comforting kisses at her neck didn't hurt.

Or maybe they did. Maybe this whole thing did. Maybe it did more harm than good—because even though that felt fucking exhilarating, *still* felt fucking exhilarating, it wasn't healthy. Wait, was it? She wasn't sure. She wasn't even sure why she gave a shit when most of her habits were unhealthy anyway. Jecka's version was healthier than the alternative, perhaps, but she shouldn't need either. Jecka shouldn't need to do this. Nicole shouldn't need…

…

"Jecka?"

Once again her voice was swiped by a stranger, but a stranger Jecka eagerly squeezed in response.

The next question took a few tries, words crumbling to ashes, tasting just the same, like maybe they were meant to stay buried rather than resurrected. "Is this my fault?"

She wasn't sure why she asked or what she was even asking. Her fault she tore her arms to shreds? Her fault they were becoming raisins in the bathtub? Her fault Jecka's work was disrupted? Her fault Jecka wasted time on her at all? She had no idea. Maybe it didn't matter.

Maybe she just wanted an answer.

Jecka never demanded clarification, instead gently maneuvering Nicole so they faced each other. Jecka ensured Nicole was looking at her, could see the emotion in her glowing eyes even if she couldn't discern them before letting her feel them too, using both hands to firmly press Nicole's over her pounding heart. Each *thump* felt stronger than the last, like attempting to burst from Jecka's chest into Nicole's grasp—even though that would be suicidal and Nicole would probably panic and chuck it against the wall—but sometimes people did things that simply made no sense, especially when they cared too much.

And Jecka cared *way* too much.

After several more beats, enough for the pattern to instill on her palm, Jecka smiled. "Yeah," she said. "This is all your fault, Nicole."

The itching stopped.

For the first time since the gunshot, the itching stopped.

Her breathing stopped, too, and she waited to be wrong. She waited for the inevitable *just kidding* that came packaged with everything seemingly too good to be true—which, she knew from experience, *was* everything.

Everything except Jecka.

Jecka was her one consistency that never faltered, even with Nicole's patronizing mom and pedophile brother and dead dad. The one who never spoiled despite Nicole being rotten to her core. The one Nicole could choose to leave but who hadn't yet left her, even when she'd be better off. The one who should've been the easiest to lose, who suicidal ideation should've guaranteed to lose, but Jecka was even more stubborn than her. Jecka would stop at nothing to get what she wanted—even if what she wanted was a self-deprecating emo ho with no future beyond scraping by on borrowed money and drugs. And if Jecka was willing to give her those things now, maybe she would after high school, too. Maybe 'after high school' actually existed. Maybe with Jecka she could manage a miracle.

A stunning bitch, through and through.

Even so, even knowing she could call this stunning bitch *hers*, Nicole wasn't naive. After spending the latest years of her fucked up life playing tic-tac-toe on her wrists she knew this relief was temporary. She knew the urge could return at any moment.

But not this one.

This one was spent looping her lovingly inscribed arms around Jecka's neck, a pink tsunami sloshing over the side of the tub as she surged forward and crashed their lips together. She swallowed Jecka's delighted gasp, a thrill shooting down her spine over getting to surprise *her* for once, over getting to choose and act on her choice, addicted from the first dose. She pressed closer, tightening her hold, because when her arms were occupied she couldn't cut. When she was kissing Jecka she couldn't think of anything else. When she was distracted the only thing that mattered was the distraction—and Jecka was her favourite distraction.

Sometimes Nicole wondered who she'd be if she never met Jecka.

She'd live without knowing.

End Notes

EDIT: absolutely beautiful art has been made of this fic, you can find it HERE

Thank you so much for reading! As always any kudos and comments would be greatly appreciated :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!